

THE SEPARATION OF NARNIA AND TAO

Zak Schmoll on the Destruction of
Objective Truth in *The Last Battle*

The Last Battle, C.S. Lewis's beautiful conclusion to the *Chronicles of Narnia*, begins with the undermining of truth. Once the people surrender their beliefs in the actual objective truths in the world, the consequences are vast and dangerous. In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis calls this set of real truths "the Tao" and explains what would happen to a society if it departed from that collection of universal realities. Through *The Last Battle*, it becomes quite clear that separating a society from the foundation of the Tao is a direct pathway to destruction.

After finding a lion skin in the Cauldron Pool, Shift, the devious ape, comes up with a plan to deceive the free beasts of Narnia. By dressing his best friend, Puzzle the donkey, in the lion's skin, he thinks he can trick his countrymen into believing that

Aslan had arrived. Surprisingly, the fake Aslan then tells them to do exactly what Shift himself had wanted. He sees an opportunity to seize power through this act of misunderstanding and confusion.

Even before Shift reveals his intentions to Puzzle, the donkey begins to protest. He does not believe that it would be respectful to Aslan, the truly great lion, if another creature like a donkey began walking around impersonating a lion. His fears are quickly quashed by Shift, who questions his qualifications for even thinking in the first place.

"You know you're no good at thinking, Puzzle, so why don't you let me do your thinking for you? Why don't you treat me as I treat you? I don't think I can do everything. I know you're better at some things than I am. That's why I let you go into the Pool; I knew you'd do it better than me. But why can't I have my turn when it comes to something I can do and you can't? Am I never to be allowed to do anything? Do be fair."¹

The hierarchy is clear. Shift was to be the thinker while Puzzle was to be the mindless follower who accepted the truth from the mouth of Shift without

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), Kindle Locations 14236-14239. Kindle Edition.

reservation. Because he did not have the strength of will to resist the ape's challenge, Puzzle eventually consented to wearing the lion's skin and became an accessory to the highly successful crime of perverting the Narnian conception of who the true Aslan actually was.

Thus, the slippery slope began with this very simple lie: Puzzle should not think for himself. He was then unable to comprehend the truth without the help of Shift. Once Puzzle bought into that lie, he could be used by Shift as a weapon of moral destruction. If Puzzle had refused to be the fake Aslan, much of the rest of the plot could not have unfolded in the disastrous way that it did for the land of Narnia.

The importance of objective truth plays a central role in much of Lewis's writing just as it does in *The Last Battle*. He defines the existence of the Tao in *The Abolition of Man* as, "The doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are."² He argues that there are certain universal truths affirmed by humanity, regardless of geography, creed or religion. These accepted truths defined some type of path for human morality to proceed down in a way that all

² C.S Lewis. *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), Kindle Locations 170-171, Kindle Edition.

people could affirm. Humanity was designed to recognize certain things as true, and this collection of external ideas built the collective Tao.

According to Lewis, undermining this collection of truths would have disastrous results. He wrote, “In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make Men without Chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise.”³ By rejecting that which is true, humanity destroys the very virtues that they desire. We ripped out the heart of discernment by arguing that goodness is only a matter of individual perception and feeling, but we continue to expect conformance to traditional, objective conceptions of virtue. In one breath we insist that something like theft is truly wrong, while preaching that right and wrong are subjective. It is reminiscent of the proverb that one cannot have one’s cake and eat it too. Is it reasonable to demand virtue while simultaneously rejecting that virtue itself exists? It is a self-defeating cycle.

This cycle begins just like the deception by Shift. It begins by telling people that they are not capable of discerning truth. They must listen to someone else for the interpretation of that which is true. In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis takes aim at two writers, whom he labels with the pseudonyms Gaius and

³ Ibid. Kindle Locations 231-232.

Titius, for, this inability to discern truth (whether intentional or not).

Speaking about the concept of sublimity, Lewis said of these authors' perspective, "The feelings which make a man call an object sublime are not sublime feelings but feelings of veneration. If This is sublime is to be reduced at all to a statement about the speaker's feelings, the proper translation would be I have humble feelings."⁴

The deception then is the same: it is not possible for anyone to perceive the objective truth that a particular waterfall is sublime. The only truth that any one person can know is his or her reaction to something. Feelings can be known, but they cannot be universalized. That universal, objective truth is beyond comprehension, and all statements must therefore be reduced to subjectivity. Shift alleges that objective truth is beyond the reach of Puzzle as well. All he can do is say how he feels about particular situations, but that is not reality. Reality is the way that Shift defines it.

After executing this deception, Shift imagines and creates a Narnia that is much different than what would have ever developed on its original trajectory. Just like Gaius and Titius produce "Men without Chests," Shift turns his attention to literal

⁴ Ibid., Kindle Locations 45-46.

production. Consistent with his species' appetite, he wants a world with more oranges and bananas. Puzzle is again confused and points out that, "There aren't many people - in fact, I don't think there's anyone but yourself - who wants those sort of things."⁵ Shift creates the world in his image. He wants the world to reflect his desires and produce what he desired to consume.

Puzzle realizes that the world is not really that way. The reality is that there is only so much demand for bananas and oranges, but Shift continues to insist that the actual truth was quite a bit different because everyone should want what he wants. This was a change in production for the land of Narnia in a way that no one would want. All of the other creatures who apparently had no desire for bananas or oranges would not like this new world. They would want the virtue of their old world back where production was distributed to the wants of all, but when Shift begins to interfere with the objective reality of the demand in Narnia, the entire nation is literally destroyed.

Lewis's warning is clear. The world operates based upon a set of unspoken yet universally understood laws.. If it is possible for deception to find its way into the intelligentsia and convince the

⁵ Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Kindle Locations 14279-14280.

populace that they do not possess the capability to discern objective truth, the results become worse and worse. Objective truth does exist and, as Lewis laid out clearly in *The Abolition of Man*, people all over the world across the centuries have recognized it. We ought not be bullied into separating ourselves from that great tradition.

Bibliography

"The Separation of Narnia and Tao"

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